

Visionary Plants and Ecstatic Shamanism

BY PETER T. FURST

BIG RAVEN, WHALE, little earth spirits, and a deity named Vahiyinin, are the actors in a tale a Siberian Koryak shaman told a Russian ethnographer at the turn of the nineteenth century. Big Raven is both culture hero and trickster in tribal Siberia. Whale is whale; the earth spirits are the fly agaric, *Amanita muscaria*; and Vahiyinin, meaning Existence, is the great sky god. In guides to mushrooms, the fly agaric is sometimes called “deadly poisonous,” but although it can cause intestinal upsets, this is undeserved.

For centuries, and probably many millennia, the fly agaric served shamans in Siberia, and probably across much of the north-Eurasian forest belt, as an ecstatic inebriant. Fly agaric was the means by which they believed themselves, and were believed by others, to free their souls for out-of-body journeys to the spirit world.

In the Koryak tale, Raven and Whale were friends. One day, so goes the tale, Whale swam too close to shore and became stuck in the mud. He called on Raven to lift him up and escort him back to deep water; but try as Raven tried, he was not strong enough. He told Whale to wait while he asked advice from Vahiyinin.

The god told Raven to go to a certain plain where he would find earth spirits called *wapaq*. If he ate some *wapaq* they would give him the strength to help his brother Whale. Vahiyinin spat upon the earth, and wherever his spittle fell, there sprang up little white spirit beings with big red hats shaped like umbrellas and spotted with white flecks.

Raven ate some and soon felt so exhilarated and powerful that he was able to lift Whale and return him to the open sea. He told the *wapaq* spirits to grow forever on this earth. To his children, the Koryak people, Raven said that when anyone who was sick ate a *wapaq* it would tell him what ailed him, or explain the meaning of a dream, show him the Upperworld, the world beneath the ground, or foretell the future.

The fly agaric grows in many places, including North and



Chumash cave painting of a toloache (*Datura innoxia*) vision. Painted Cave, Santa Barbara, California.

Middle America. There are tantalizing hints but no firm evidence that it ever enjoyed the same importance in the Indian Americas as it did in Siberian shamanism. But other plants with similar effects on consciousness did. Yet it is Siberia, where numerous tribal religions were focused on the fly agaric as visionary inebriant, that is the homeland of the ancestors of the First Americans. Beginning perhaps 30-40,000 years ago and ending around 10,000 B.C., small groups of Siberian hunters pulled up stakes for unknown lands across the Bering Sea and gradually spread into virtually every corner of the western hemisphere.

Why they would have ignored the fly agaric's American cousins—if indeed they did—remains a mystery. Still, it may be that the Siberian tradition of the fly agaric was indirectly responsible for the extraordinary proliferation of species with comparable effects on consciousness in the Indian Americas.

To date, 200 such species in ritual use have been identified, and there are undoubtedly more yet to be recognized. That's a hundred times more than the two species reported by the earliest Spanish explorers. One was a powerful snuff with which Fray Ramón Pané, a companion of Christopher Columbus on his second voyage in 1494, saw the Taíno inhabitants of the island of Hispaniola intoxicate themselves into ecstatic out-of-body journeys to Otherworlds. The other was a shrub the misnamed



Huichols have mixed feelings about the solanaceous *Datura* and its relatives, crediting them with both good and evil powers. On a visit to Bandelier National Monument, an Anasazi pueblo in northern New Mexico, Guadalupe de la Cruz Ríos, widow of the late Huichol shaman-artist Ramón Medina, implores a large flowering *Datura innoxia* not to do harm.

“Indians” called *tabaco*, whose leaves they set on fire to inhale the smoke for the same “diabolical” purpose. Smoking is in fact the most common method of tobacco use, but there are others, including licking, sucking, drinking, inhaling as snuff, and intestinal absorption by enema.

ANTIQUITY OF PSYCHEDELIC PLANTS

It was not until the 20th century that the antiquity of plant “hallucinogens” as triggers of shamanic ecstasy was firmly established. In South America, the earliest evidence concerns *San Pedro*, the popular name of *Trichocereus pachanoi*, a tall, columnar cactus that is native to Peru and Ecuador. Its principal visionary alkaloid is mescaline, first isolated from the peyote cactus in Germany in 1896 and brought to popular attention in 1954 in Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*. Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) is a small cactus native to the north-central Mexican desert and the lower Río Grande valley. Historically, it was used by the Aztecs and other indigenous peoples. For Huichols, who take peyote to be the herbal transformation of a divine deer and who gather it on arduous pilgrimages in the state of San Luis Potosí, peyote stands at the very heart of their indigenous religion.

Except for sharing mescaline, and that both are succulents, peyote and *San Pedro* are unrelated. Spines of *San Pedro*, which is highly valued by Andean shamans and Mestizo *curanderos* and their clientele, have been excavated in sites dating to ca. 1500 B.C. But in ceramics of the great Chavín civilization of Peru, which flourished around 800-1000 B.C., we see the cactus, itself, in direct association with the jaguar, the principal animal *alter ego* of Amazonian shamans.



Carved slate snuff tablet and forked bird bone inhaler, excavated by Max Uhle. (Tiahuanaco, Peru. Tablet L. 4 3/4”; W. 2 1/2”; Tube L. 4 1/2”; W. 1 1/4.”)

The proven age of *San Pedro* use was put to shame by discoveries in ancient Desert Culture rock shelters in southern Texas. Among cultural debris in these caves, archaeologists have found two ritual intoxicants, the red bean-like seeds, misnamed “mescal beans,” of *Sophora secundiflora*, a flowering tree native to the southern plains; and peyote. The seeds were first reported by Cabeza de Vaca in 1539 as an item of trade among Texas Indians, and thereafter as a ritual intoxicant in shamanistic initiation ceremonies sometimes called “Deer Dance.”

This ritual intoxication practice, shared by a number of tribes in the southern Plains, died out in the last quarter of the 19th century. The amazing thing is, that on the evidence of radiocarbon dating, the practice endured for some ten thousand years—withstanding that one of the alkaloids isolated from the seeds is cytisine, capable of causing convulsions and even death from respiratory failure when taken in large doses.

The oldest dates for ceremonial caches of *Sophora secundiflora* seeds, 8129 and 8440 B.C., came from a Desert Culture cave in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas called Bonfire Shelter, where the caches were associated with the bones of extinct *Bison antiquus*. At another Trans-Pecos location, Frightful Cave, the earliest occurrence of *Sophora* was dated

at 7265 B.C., and the seeds were also present in all subsequent cultural strata. And at Fate Bell Shelter, in the Amistad Dam area of Trans-Pecos Texas, a region rich in shamanistic rock paintings of spirit beings and shamans, the seeds were present in every cultural stratum from 7000 B.C. to A.D. 1000 when the Desert Culture gave way to a new way of life based on maize cultivation.

The archaeological peyotes from Texas are not far behind in age. One pair preserved in the Witte Museum in San Antonio, and tested at UCLA, yielded C-14 dates equivalent to 7000 years before the present. And a recent issue of the British medical journal *The Lancet* reported a radio-carbon date of 5700 years before the present for another pair, with the added bonus of a small but significant residue of mescaline.

All this points to very early discoveries of hallucinogens, their integration into Amerindian religions, and rituals related to a variety of visionary plants. This, in turn, relates to an intriguing and quite plausible hypothesis advanced by anthropologist Weston La Barre. La Barre is the author of *The Peyote Cult*, a classic history of the 250,000-member pan-Indian Native American Church, originally published in 1938 and expanded and reissued several times since.

LA BARRE, SIBERIAN SHAMANISM, AND AMERINDIAN RELIGION

In 1970, two old friends and professional associates, both now deceased, engaged in a friendly debate. Richard Evans Schultes was director of the Botanical Museum of Harvard University and preeminent authority on New World plant hallucinogens. Weston La Barre was professor of anthropology at Duke University. What, asked Schultes, explains the small number of known visionary plants recorded in the Old World, and their infinitely greater number in the New? The differential fates of shamanism in the two hemispheres, answered La Barre. La Barre's argument was essentially this:

At some time in the distant past, when small bands of Siberian hunters set out for unknown lands across the Bering Sea, their baggage might have been light, but surely it included items that related to their well-developed religions and rituals. These would not have been very different from the ecstatic tribal shamanism that focused on the fly agaric mushroom, described from Siberia since the 1700s. Once settled in the Americas, their shamanic core remained intact through time and space, so much

so, that to this day, all American Indian religions, including that of the militaristic and expansionist Aztec civilization, can rightly be called shamanic.

Even if they seemingly ignored the American varieties of the sacred mushroom of their ancestors—and we have no evidence either way—as inheritors and practitioners of religious beliefs and practices originating in ecstatic Siberian shamanism, with the ecstatic trance as the indispensable foundation of shamanic ideology and practice, the First Americans would have been “culturally programmed” for conscious exploration of their new environments for plants with divine powers that replicated those

their ancestors attributed to the fly agaric. The shamanic character of Native American religions remained intact. Prior to the European invasion and colonization, the Indian Americas experienced none of the profound religious and socio-economic transformations that caused the eradication of ecstatic shamanism in much of the Old World, and with it, knowledge and use of visionary plants.

It was La Barre's contention that the extensive reliance by diverse Amerindians on psychoactive plants is evidence of the survival of ecstatic Mesolithic/Paleolithic shamanism. And so we find an abundance of such plants as “allies” of the shaman in Amazonia and the Andes. In Mexico they include especially the “sacred mushrooms,” peyote; several species of *Datura* and its relatives; and perhaps most interesting, *ololiuhqui*. This is a Nahuatl term meaning no more than “little round thing.” The Aztecs applied this term to the seeds of two species of morning glory, the white-flowered *Turbina* (form. *Rivea*) corymbosa and the purple or blue *Ipomea violacea*. *Ololiuhqui* gives nary a hint of the remarkable qualities inherent in these seeds.

The reason why *ololiuhqui*, which modern Indians abbreviated to *ololuc*, is of such interest was due to an entirely unexpected discovery by Albert Hofmann, the brilliant Swiss chemist who, in 1938, was the co-discoverer of LSD (d-lysergic acid diethylamide). Several investigators had previously failed to uncover the morning glories' secret. But in 1960, Hofmann, having received several pounds of the seeds from Mexico, announced his discovery of the active principles of *ololiuhqui* as lysergic acid derivatives.

Such derivatives are closely related to synthetic LSD and to ergot, the primitive fungus infestation of rye that in the Middle Ages was responsible for the mass hysteria known as St. Anthony's Fire. As Hoffman pointed out, never before had these fungal alkaloids been identified in the higher plants.



Peruvian stirrup vessel with *San Pedro* cactus effigy (*Trichocereus pachanoi*). With its high content of the visionary alkaloid mescaline, it is widely employed in shamanic curing in north coastal Peru and elsewhere in the Andes. There is also archaeological evidence for its use in ancient Peru as far back as 1500 B.C.

TOBACCO: FOOD OF THE GODS

Notwithstanding his path-breaking *Tobacco and Shamanism in South America* by Johannes Wilbert, the UCLA ethnographer of Indian South America, it comes as a surprise to many people that tobacco functions for a number of South American Indian shamans as their *only* ritual intoxicant, or at least as the most prominent of several in their ecstatic pharmacopoeias. Up and down the Indian Americas, indigenous people insist that tobacco was a gift from their ancestors and their Gods. They also believed that, though requiring tobacco as their most essential sustenance, in giving it to the people, the deities



The late shaman-artist Ramón Medina Silva, with gourd bowl filled with slices of peyote for sacramental distribution to participating peyoteros on a peyote pilgrimage to the sacred peyote desert in San Luis Potosí in December, 1968.

failed to keep some for themselves and so made themselves dependent on humankind.

This is no ordinary tobacco, of course. It is *Nicotiana rustica*, one of the two hybrid cultigens that, six to eight thousand years ago, may well have been, with manioc, the first fruits of tropical forest agriculture. The other hybrid cultigen was *N. tabacum*. Both

had their origin in the valleys between Peru and Ecuador, or possibly Bolivia. *N. rustica* has a content of the addictive nicotine many times higher than *N. tabacum*. It is also far more capable of triggering the desired and indispensable ecstatic trance. This, Wilbert believes, explains why Indian peoples adopted, and became dependent on, *N. rustica* as shamanic intoxicant, while *N. tabacum* became the ancestor of modern blends.

There is much more to be said, as Wilbert does, about the history, ethnology, and biological and psychological effects of *N. rustica*, as well as the interplay between these and some of the physical and emotional characteristics of South American shamans. Wilbert has been working closely for half a century with the shamans of the Warao of the Orinoco Delta in Venezuela, who use nothing but tobacco in their intoxicant practice and who have constructed a complex and sophisticated philosophical cosmos of tobacco smoke. But perhaps nothing exemplifies the close functional and ideological relationship of shamans and tobacco better than that the Matsigenka of eastern Peru, who live north of the famous Inca city of Machu Picchu, and call their shaman *seripi'gari*, "he who is intoxicated by tobacco." 🏠

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Dr. Furst has done fieldwork in Venezuela among the Warao Indians, in Mexico among the Huichols, and throughout Mesoamerica, focusing on pre-Columbian art and archaeology, religion, and shamanism. In 1964 he curated the first exhibition in the United States of Precolumbian gold, and in 1968 the first exhibition of Huichol art, both at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. He is author of more than 120 books and scholarly articles, including many on Huichol art, religion, and mythology.

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